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Carver/New Criticism Essay

“Cathedral” by Raymond Carver is a short story from the Pulitzer Prize nominated book *Cathedral* published in 1983. Raymond Carver is a short story writer who is known for hiding hidden pearls of reality in his stories which lead to a greater, beautiful truth at the end. The story Cathedral is told in first person and is about a blind man who is coming to visit the narrator and his wife. The narrator does not realize how much the blind man means to his wife and he does not look forward to his arrival, but by the end of the story the narrator has an epiphany and “sees.” The narrator automatically sets up a barrier between himself and the blind man simply because he is blind, but when the blind man asks him to describe a cathedral for him, a kind of transformation occurs in the narrator and he begins to understand him. This makes the narrator confront his own misconceptions not just about the blind man, but in others as well. The narrator of the story is never named, but Carver writes the story in a way in which the blooming relationship between the narrator and the blind man is more important than the name. Although “Cathedral” is written from the point of view of someone the reader does not know or like at the beginning of the story, Carver creates a kind of paradox in which the protagonist is desperately human and at the same time desperately *not* human by story’s end.

One way to examine Carver’s work is through the lens of New Criticism, a body of literary theoretical criticism popularized in the first half of the twentieth century but subsequently supplanted with more culturally and politically relevant theoretical approaches later on. This theory (was) used to examine the “great works”; it specifically studies certain literary features such as speaker, voice, metaphor, character and paradox that come together within a successful story to make it perfect and “uniformly beautiful.” When looking at a work, New Critics question the text and look for tensions, ambiguities or oppositions. By definition, a paradox is an ambiguity because it is something that contradicts itself. In Raymond Carver’s “Cathedral” there are many paradoxes that lead to ambiguity or vagaries within the text, but then eventually resolve into a unified whole by the end.

There are many ironies and paradoxes at work in "Cathedral." We cannot fully comprehend these paradoxes though unless we first understand the tone of the narrative, though. As was mentioned earlier, in the beginning of the story the narrator is not looking forward to the blind man's visit, even though it is of great importance to his wife. It is almost as if the narrator is desperate and lonely. It is clear from the reading that the narrator does not have many friends and is quick to judge.

"If you love me," she said, "you can do this for me. If you don't love me okay. But if you had a friend, any friend, and the friend came to visit I'd make him feel comfortable..." "I don't have any blind friends," I said. "You don't have *any* friends," she said. "Period. Besides," she said, "goddam it, his wife's just died! Don't you understand that? The man's lost his wife!" I didn't answer. She'd told me a little about the blind man's wife. Her name was Beulah. Beulah! That's a name for a colored woman. "Was his wife a negro?" I asked. "Are you crazy?" my wife said. "Have you just flipped or something?".... "What's wrong with you?" (Carver 212)

As we can see here, the narrator is not very understanding nor does he really care about his wife. The narrator is distant from his wife and seems very alone and negative. He is unsympathetic to his wife and the blind man. It is almost as if the narrator is hostile towards the relationship his wife and the blind man have. This sets the tone of the piece as negative and desperate and creates a basis for the fundamental ambiguities and paradoxes in the story.

One paradox the reader observes in "Cathedral" is in the beginning of the story. The narrator explains how his wife told him about the blind man and she allowed him to touch her face on the last day that she worked for him.

On her last day in the office, the blind man asked if he could touch her face. She agreed to this. She told me he touched his fingers to every part of her face, her nose- even her neck! She never forgot it. She even tried to write a poem about it... She wrote a poem or two every year, usually after something important happened to her. (210)

This shows that when the blind man touched the wife's face it deeply affected her. A kind of paradox is created here because the reader gets the sense that although the narrator and his wife are married, they have not had this kind of connection. When the narrator says "even her neck!...She wrote a poem or two ever year, usually after something important happened to her" (210), it is as if the narrator is resentful and jealous of the blind man because he and his wife do

not have that kind of trust. This is a paradox because it is an avoidable situation. If the narrator were more open and less closed to the world, perhaps he and his wife would be closer and more trusting of one another. This is also seen later on in the story when the narrator's wife asks if he wants to listen to one of the tapes she is sending the blind man: "She lowered the volume. After a few moments of harmless chitchat, I heard my own name in the mouth of this stranger, this blind man I didn't even know! And then this: "From all you've said about him, I can only conclude-" But we were interrupted... Maybe just as well. I'd heard all I wanted to" (211). The narrator does not want to know what the blind man was going to say about him. Again, it seems as if the narrator is angry that his wife and the blind man have this sort of relationship, but it is paradoxical because it does not have to be this way. If the narrator were more open and accepting of the world he would have a better relationship with his wife. And because the blind man is so close minded, it also affects his views of the blind man in a negative light and therefore strains his relationship with his wife even more since the blind man is so dear to her.

Perhaps the biggest and most crucial paradox in the story is how the narrator never "sees" his life for what it really is until a *blind man* helps him to "see" it. Throughout the night, the narrator is cordial enough, but he never loses that prejudgment about the blind man until the blind man asks him to help him draw a cathedral. The narrator's eyes are closed, and the blind man is tracing his hand along with the narrator's:

But I had my eyes closed. I thought I'd keep them that way for a little longer. I thought it was something I ought to do. "Well?" he said. "Are you looking?" My eyes were still closed. I was in my house. I knew that. But I didn't feel like I was inside anything. "It's really something," I said. (228)

When the blind man asks the narrator to help him draw a cathedral, he is not just asking him to draw a cathedral. The blind man is helping the narrator to release his close minded views of the world, and open up to another person. The blind man is helping the narrator transform. The narrator's physical eyes are closed, but his eyes to the world are open. Of course, the paradox of this is that it is a blind man who helps the narrator to become a better person, and to "see" things in a new, perhaps more spiritual or at transcendent way.

Although Carver ties paradox into many of his stories in *Cathedral*, "Cathedral" stands out when it comes to central, embedded paradoxes that function to hold the story together and provide the basis for its fundamental moment of transcendent truth and unified beauty by story's

end. Those moments of acute, ever so poignant paradox help make the story richer, and they function to teach us something important as readers also. By the end of “Cathedral” the reader is left with a certain measure of beauty and truth because of these central paradoxes that are at once created and resolved in the end. In a review of *Cathedral*, Irving Howe wrote: "A few of Carver's stories ... can already be counted among the masterpieces of American fiction." “Cathedral” is certainly one of them because of the way Carver makes the reader critically embrace the real, troubled souls that people his stories and our world – there is beauty to be found here, even in the most unlikely of places, he seems to tell us.